

7 How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?

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How does it feel to be a problem? Just over a century ago, W. E. B. Du Bois asked that very question in his American classic *The Souls of Black Folk*, and he offered an answer. “Being a problem is a strange experience,” he wrote, “peculiar even,” no doubt evoking the “peculiar institution” of slavery. Du Bois composed his text during Jim Crow, a time of official racial segregation that deliberately obscured to the wider world the human details of African-American life. Determined to pull back “the veil” separating populations, he showed his readers a fuller picture of the black experience, including “the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls.”

A century later, Arabs and Muslim Americans are the new “problem” of American society, but there have of course been others. Native Americans, labeled “merciless Indian savages” by the Declaration of Independence, were said to be beyond civilization and able to comprehend only the brute language of force. With the rise of Catholic immigration to the country in the nineteenth century, Irish and Italian Americans were attacked for their religion. They suffered mob violence and frequent accusations of holding papal loyalties above republican values. During World War I, German Americans were loathed and reviled, sauerkraut was redubbed “liberty cabbage,” and several states banned the teaching of German, convinced that the language itself promoted un-American values. Between the world wars, anti-Semitism drove Jewish Americans out of universities and jobs and fueled wild and pernicious conspiracy theories concerning warfare and world domination. Japanese Americans were herded like cattle into internment camps during World War II (as were smaller numbers of German, Italian, Hungarian, and Romanian Americans). Chinese Americans were commonly suspected of harboring Communist sympathies during the McCarthy era, frequently losing careers and livelihoods. And Hispanic Americans have long been seen as outsider threats to American culture, even though their presence here predates the formation of the present-day United States.

But since the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Arabs and Muslims, two groups virtually unknown to most Americans prior to 2001, now hold the dubious distinction of being the first new communities of suspicion after the hard-won victories of the civil-rights era. . . .

In this rocky terrain, young Arab and Muslim Americans are forging their lives as the newest minorities in the American imagination. In their circumstances and out

of their actions, they are also shaping the contours of a future American society. And though they don't always succeed in their efforts, the human drama of their predicament has now become a part of what it means to be an American.

The burning question really is whether American society will treat them as equals. The answer is not entirely clear. Simply put, the general public seems divided about the Arabs and Muslims in our midst. On the one hand, the last few years have seen a spirit of inclusion and desire for mutual cooperation spread across the country. Arab and Muslim organizations have matured in this environment, as they engage the general public more openly and fully than before, and the results are evident. Islam is increasingly understood as an American religion—in 2006 the first American Muslim, Keith Ellison, was elected to Congress—and Arab Americans are now frequently acknowledged to be an integral part of the United States. Despite an unwarranted controversy, the first dual-language Arabic-English New York City public high school opened its doors in Brooklyn in 2007. Arabs and Muslims are successfully integrating themselves into the institutional framework of American society.

Yet too many people continue to see Arabs and Muslims in America—particularly the young generation—through narrowed eyes, as enemies living among us. Key members of the political class, an often shrill news media, and a law-enforcement establishment that succumbs to ethnic and religious profiling lead the charge, and Muslims and Arabs are scrutinized for sedition at every turn. Even the most mundane facts of their lives, such as visiting mosques and *shisha* cafés, are now interpreted as something sinister and malevolent. On any given day, popular feelings seem to swing wildly between these poles of fear and acceptance, illustrating what the sociologist Louise Cainkar has called “the apparent paradox of this historical moment: [where] repression and inclusion may be happening at the same time.”

It's a strange place to inhabit, and it reveals not only the bifurcated nature of contemporary American society but also the somewhat precarious condition of Arab and Muslim Americans. Because their situation here is ultimately dependent less on what happens on the home front and more on what happens in the Middle East, Muslim and Arab Americans know that their own domestic security and their ability to live full American lives turn on the winds of global conflicts and on America's posture in the world and its policies abroad.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois observed that the treatment of African Americans stands as “a concrete test of the underlying principles of the great republic.” In fact, the same can be said about Arabs and Muslims today. However, the principles currently at stake revolve not only around issues of full equality and inclusion, but fundamentally around the consequences that American foreign policy has on domestic civil rights. This condition is not new, and the history is important to remember.

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Islam was practiced in this land centuries ago. As far back as the colonial era, many West African Muslims were sold into slavery, making Muslim-American history older than the republic itself. Mustapha, historians tell us, was actually a fairly common name among slaves in colonial South Carolina. For their part, Arabs have been

arriving on these shores since the latter part of the nineteenth century, when mostly Christian Arabs from Mount Lebanon packed up their belongings and landed on Ellis Island with an average of \$31.85 in their pockets, more than the \$12.26 that Polish immigrants carried or the \$21.32 of the Greeks. The migrations of both Arabs and Muslims have ebbed and flowed over the years for many reasons, primarily because of the vicissitudes of American immigration law.

In the late nineteenth century, a few years after they began arriving in the United States, Arab Americans established themselves on Washington Street in Lower Manhattan (dubbed “Little Syria”), where they opened stores, published lots of newspapers, lived closely, fought among themselves, and worried about being too different from other Americans or about becoming too American. (The move to Brooklyn happened mostly in the 1940s, with the construction of the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel, which razed much of Little Syria.) The early community thrived mostly as pack peddlers who, after stocking up on jewelry and notions from the stores on Washington Street, would then set off to sell their Holy Land wares, criss-crossing the country, often on foot.

The Washington Street shops spawned a certain amount of nineteenth-century exotic curiosity. An 1892 *New York Tribune* article noted that in them were boxes piled high with gossamer silks, olivewood trinkets, and luxurious satins. “In the midst of all this riot of the beautiful and odd,” the article says, “stands the dealer, the natural gravity of his features relaxed into a smile of satisfaction at the wonder and delight expressed by his American visitor. But the vision ends, and with many parting ‘sa-laams’ one goes back to the dust and dirt, the noise and bustle” of Washington Street.

The early Arab-American community also encountered ethnic bigotry typical of the period. An 1890 *New York Times* article, for example, manages to illustrate this in a few words, while insulting a few others along the way. “The foreign population in the lower part of this city has of late years been increased by the Arabic-speaking element from the Lebanon, in Syria,” it begins. “In clannishness and outlandish manners these people resemble the Chinese and what are called the Diego Italians. Nearly all of them are Maronite [Christians], and in many respects they are inferior to the Chinese and Italians, who do possess a certain amount of self-respect and are willing to work honestly and work hard for a living.” The comments seem antiquarian today (“Diego Italians”?), but what we find here, between exoticism and chauvinism, is precisely the nation’s early-twentieth-century spirit, which welcomed and reviled foreigners simultaneously. (Like any ethnic story, really, Arab-American history reveals as much or more about *American* culture as it does about immigrant ethnic mores.)

The second phase of Arab-American history dates from around 1909 until 1944. During this period the main issue plaguing the Arab-American community, beside the growing unrest in Palestine, was whether Arabs could naturalize as American citizens. According to the citizenship laws of the period (and until 1952), only “free white persons” could qualify for naturalization, and laws were passed explicitly to bar “Asiatics” from American citizenship. Confronted with this reality, the Arab-American community from across the nation mobilized to prove that they were indeed “free white people,” and a series of court rulings eventually affirmed that position. A close

examination of these years similarly reveals much less about the genetic makeup of Arabs and much more about America's domestic racial politics between the wars.

When an immigration judge ruled in 1942 that the Yemeni Ahmed Hassan—perhaps the first Arab Muslim to face the court (the others had been Arab Christians)—could not petition for citizenship, the community faced a setback. “Arabs are not white persons within the meaning of the [Immigration] Act,” wrote Judge Arthur Tuttle, who heard Hassan's petition, citing Hassan's Muslim background as proof of his racial difference. “Apart from the dark skin of the Arabs,” he explained, “it is well known that they are a part of the Mohammedan world and that a wide gulf separates their culture from that of the predominately *sic* Christian peoples of Europe.”

Yet less than a year and a half later, the court changed its mind. In 1944, Mohamed Mohriez, “an Arab born in Sanhy, Badan, Arabia,” who had been in the United States since 1921, succeeded in his case. Why the change? District Judge Charles E. Wyzanski explained. The “vital interest [of the United States] as a world power” required granting Mohriez's petition, wrote the judge, because it was now necessary “to promote friendlier relations between the United States and other nations and so as to fulfill the promise that we shall treat all men as created equal.” Part of these warmer ties included a controversial aid package made in February 1943 under the Lend-Lease Act to Saudi Arabia, as the United States was now eager to secure access to kingdom's massive oil reserves. In other words, as the United States assumed its leadership role on the world stage, the domestic understandings of America's racial-classification system and where Arabs fit within it altered alongside. The exigencies of international politics changed the supposedly immutable facts of the Arab “race,” all within the span of seventeen months.

The decision was significant, but it had little effect on the Arab-American community, since immigration was still mostly a closed door until 1965. But when the immigration laws changed again in that year, abandoning the quota system that had favored European immigrants, the community grew substantially with new arrivals. . . . This is also a period when two other important things were happening in the United States: the civil-rights movement and, after 1967, the deepening role of the United States in the Middle East in the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Now, unlike in the earlier periods of Arab-American history, it will be American foreign policy and its designs on the Middle East—and not America's domestic ethnic or racial hierarchies—that define the parameters of Arab American life. . . .

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At least since the Second World War and especially since 1967, the United States has become progressively intertwined in the affairs of the Middle East. (“Whoever controls the Middle East controls access to three continents,” counseled British ambassador Sir Oliver Franks to American officials in 1950.) But that involvement has been far from benign. For several long decades and through a series of security pacts, arms sales, military engagements, covert actions, and overt wars, the United States has followed a course that supported one dictatorial regime after another, sought control of the natural resources of the region, attempted to forge client states amenable

to U.S. interests, and, with the cooperation of native elites, engaged in a policy of neorealist stability at the expense of the aspirations of the vast majority of people who live in the region. . . .

One can debate whether this history since 1967 constitutes an “imperial” or “hegemonic” posture of the United States concerning the Middle East. . . . But since the terrorist attacks of 2001, things have taken a decidedly imperial turn, culminating now in the direct military occupation of a major Arab country, an adventure labeled a “colonial war in the postcolonial age,” by former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski. And the political theorists of empire have repeatedly cautioned that the consequences of imperialism can reach far beyond the colony.

In the middle book of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, titled *Imperialism*, Hannah Arendt explores the political history and implications of imperial rule, noting its bases of authority and actions in the world. She draws attention precisely to many of those pursuits and tactics of imperialism that confront us today: the establishment of penal colonies, the horrors of conquest, wild profiteering, colonial lawlessness, arbitrary and exceptional exercises of power, and the growth of racism along with its political exploitation. Arendt and others also have warned that in the long run imperialism tends not to be exercised solely in some blank, foreign space “out there” but has the dangerous capacity to return home and undermine the nation. She borrows this observation in part from the historian of the British Empire J. A. Hobson, who observed long ago that imperialism corrodes a nation’s psyche and endangers its republican institutions. Arendt labels her caution the “boomerang effects” of imperialism.

The current erosion of domestic civil rights in the age of terror ought to be viewed through this lens. This is not only about the ways that torture has been normalized into American culture or how the moral questions raised by maintaining the penal colony at Guantánamo Bay cost the Republic’s soul dearly. It is also about the specific ways that imperialism is boomeranging back directly to the home front. With the passage of the Military Commissions Act, for example, the concept of indefinite detentions—even of United States citizens—has now been enshrined into law. The government claims a national security exception in key legal cases and further employs the use of “secret evidence.” Warrantless wiretapping is now legal and pervasive. The government’s use of all these instruments of law has been detailed by others, most notably by the *Boston Globe*’s Charlie Savage in his book *Takeover: The Return of the Imperial Presidency and the Subversion of American Democracy*. But each of them has been used before the “war on terror” on certain members of the Arab-American community, as the United States sought to impose its will over the Arab region. What we are currently living through is the slow creep of imperial high-handedness into the rest of American society, performed in the name of national security and facilitated through the growth of racist policies. This fact alone menaces the foundations of American society far beyond what has happened to Arab- and Muslim-American communities. “It is indeed a nemesis of Imperialism,” writes Hobson, “that the arts and crafts of tyranny, acquired and exercised in our unfree Empire, should be turned against our liberties at home.” . . .

Suggestions for Further Reading

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